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EARLY SCHOOLS AND CHURCHES OF EDGAR COUNTY, ILLINOIS.

BY ROSE MOSS SCOTT.

The first school in Edgar County was opened in a log building in Hunter Township, in what is known as the North Arm neighborhood.

It is worthy of note that the goose quill pen was but three years behind the pioneer's axe. The honor of teaching this school is generally given to Amos Williams. Mr. Williams was considered a competent teacher for this time, especially in writing, as shown by the early records of the county. His method of writing his name officially is worthy of note. It was signed "A. Williams," all the letters of his name being capitals and joined very closely.

The first school district of this county was organized by the County Commissioners Court on March 7, 1826, and embraced the village of Paris and the adjacent farms. A petition was presented by Smith Shaw, praying for a school district, which was granted. The boundaries of this district almost conform to those of the "Paris Union School District."

The Paris schools have had an official existence since 1826. The same Amos Williams, who had the honor of being the first teacher in the county, was the first teacher in Paris in the year 1824. The first school building was a rude structure of logs surrounded by a stockade and stood at the south end of the alley which divides the block on the south side of the public square. This school house stood on the southeast corner of a lot then owned by General Alexander, which was part of his homestead.

This school was taught by Amos Williams in 1824. Isaac Alexander taught school in the same house in 1828. In 1835 one room in a building south of where the Baptist church

now stands, was used as a school room. The first school houses were of logs. The seats were benches without backs, desks were shelves along the wall. Here pupils sat to learn to write. In building the school house one log was left out above this shelf to furnish light. A fireplace heated the building.

Whatever book a child could procure was his text book. The teacher was paid by the father, paying a fixed price for each child he sent, and the teacher "boarding around" for at least part of the pay.

The boy or girl who could "read and write and do sums" was considered well educated.

There were schools kept in various places in the county as people came, but until 1855, and the enactment of the Free School Law, educational opportunities in Edgar County were limited to those who were able and willing to pay the expense, which that law required the public to pay.

After the enactment of the Free School Law of 1855, the Paris School District at once took the steps necessary to receive the benefits of that law, by selecting a site and erecting a good building with seven rooms. The same enterprise was exhibited throughout the county and school districts organized. The public school system at first met with some opposition, but the beneficial results soon became apparent. For a person to speak of the public schools in any manner other than to acknowledge their merits would classify the speaker as opposed to good government.

Provisions were made by the General Government before the organization of Illinois as a State or Territory, for the education of its people, by the donation of Section 16 of each township of public lands for the maintenance of public schools within that township.

The present office of County Superintendent of Schools had its origin in the office of School Commissioner, who was appointed by the County Commissioners' Court to negotiate the sale of the Sixteenth section. His duties were similar to those of a real estate broker. His only compensation was a

percentage on lands sold. The first School Commissioner was Jonathan Mayo, who was appointed in 1843. Mr. Mayo was succeeded by Garland B. Shelledy, who was succeeded by Mr. Kelly.

During this time a law was passed by the Legislature giving the County Commissioner power to examine and license teachers.

The first man called to this important duty was Sheridan P. Read, in 1858, after the public school system had been in operation about four years. We find in his report to the State Authorities the following: "Under the present law there has been a great improvement in the schools of this county. The districts are erecting good comfortable houses, and I do not fear but that Edgar County will take a high stand in educational matters hereafter. The great want that is felt here now is for well qualified teachers." In 1841 Edgar Academy was established by Rev. Henry I. Venable on a tract of about six acres, where the Catholic church and school are now situated.

This school was opened on the first of December, 1841, by Rev. and Mrs. Venable, as a private enterprise. It was intended this should be a school for girls, but during the first year several boys made application for instruction in the language and mathematics; it was then decided to change the plan and take both males and females.

Rev. Venable was assisted in his efforts to meet the wants of the country for educational facilities by funds furnished to him without the payment of interest in most cases. The erection of the buildings and the employment of an adequate supply of assistants involved a heavy expenditure. In the Spring of 1848 a subscription was made to make the school a Presyterian institution, and the property was passed to the control of a Board of Trustees.

This school was continued until 1868. The young men and women who received their academic education at this school numbered more than one thousand, some students coming from Indiana. John C. Means, John W. Blackburn, Miss Nancy Stout and Miss Jane Dayton were teachers. Mr.

Nelson succeeded Rev. Venable as principal. Most of the students came on horse back. Those living some distance would spend the week end, when the weather was inclement, with those living nearer the school. In those days if you wished to go for a visit you went, and when you arrived it was not necessary to present your card. Soon after the Edgar Academy was placed under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church of Paris by Mr. Venable in 1848, the Methodists of Paris instituted the Methodist Seminary under the auspices of the Methodist Church.

Colonel Mayo gave a block of ground between East Court and East Wood streets for a site—a beautiful tract covered with forest trees. A two story brick building was erected thereon for the school.

Rev. Jesse H. Moore was the principal. This school to some extent was a rival to Edgar Academy. In 1869 the Paris Union School district was organized under a special charter, and this building was then used for public schools.

CHURCHES.

The first church in this county was in the North Arm neighborhood. In 1818 the Rev. Joseph Curtis and his wife, Hannah, came to North Arm, and he established a Methodist Class at the home of Jonathan Mayo (who lived there at that time). The class consisted of Mr. Curtis and wife, Jonathan Mayo and wife, John Stratton and wife, and Sallie Whitley. Mr. Curtis was the first minister to preach the word of God in Edgar County. The place of meeting was soon moved to the Curtis home on the Clinton road, where for 24 years they worshipped. The North Arm brick church was built in 1842 and stood at the first cross roads east of the present church.

The first church organized in Paris was the Methodist Episcopal in 1823 by Rev. H. Vreedenberg, and the Presbyterian Church was organized in 1824. Both denominations worshipped in private residences or in the court house for some time and until church buildings could be constructed.

The Methodists generally met at the home of Smith Shaw, who was one of the original members of the church. In 1837 a brick church was erected by the Methodists on West Wood street, which was used as a place of worship until 1855. Some of the first Methodists of Paris were the Shaws, the Mayos, Munsells, Sandfords, Lawrences, Elliotts and Cranes.

In the log cabins in the forest or on the edge of the prairie could be found people who longed for the coming of a missionary, that they might hear the gospel. Even the trails of that time were not barriers, as people would go miles to church. Rev. Isaac Reed was such a missionary. The following extracts are from his diary:

Spring, 1824—A Macedonian call has been sent to me at Vincennes, from Paris, Ill. I returned word I would come.

Summer—Paris is the county seat of Edgar County, but a very small place of about eight cabins. It lies on the prairie.

November—At a meeting held in the school house at Paris, Ill., Nov. 6, 1824, after public worship, members of the Presbyterian Church were by prayer solemnly constituted into a church, by the name of the Presbyterian Church of Paris, John Bovell, William Means, James Eggleton, Adriel Stout, Amzi Thompson, Samuel Vance, Christian Bovell, Nancy Thompson, Barbara Alexander, Elizabeth Blackburn, Hannah Baird and Vary Vance. Samuel Vance, John Bovell and William Means were elected Ruling Elders.

In 1835 the Presbyterians erected a church on East Washington street, on a lot given to them by Samuel Vance. This was the first church erected in the county. This building was used until 1855. That year the Presbyterians built a new church on North Central avenue. The Methodists built a church the same year on North Main street. These churches were the chief attraction in Paris for many years.

In 1826 the New Providence Presbyterian Church was established in Elbridge Township, in the Ray and Ewing settlement. Religious services were held there with more regularity during the next few years than in Paris. The

church building was of logs and stood where the New Providence Cemetery now is, on a very handsome site in the midst of a grove of large beech and sugar trees.

In 1831 the settlers in Richwoods formed an organization to be known as Concord Baptist Church. The names Redmon, Bennett, Frazier, Kester, Johnson and Black were some of the pioneers of Kansas Township who believed church principles the right basis for community life. They met in homes for some months, and built a log church in 1832. The first pastor was Rev. Newport, who served for twelve years.

The church at Grandview has an interesting history. A foresighted pioneer, named John Tate, gathered a party in Augusta County, Virginia, and led them to Illinois, where they arrived in September, 1837. They came in wagons and by families.

In this spot on the grand prairie they settled, giving it the name of Grandview. The thoughtfulness of these emigrants and their high valuation of religion and education appear when it is known they brought with them a minister and school teacher, the Rev. John A. Steele, also a doctor, a brother of the clergyman.

Divine services were held in the simple Presbyterian fashion in their houses and the church duly organized on the 27th of July, 1838.

In 1837, under Rev. John A. Steele, a Presbyterian Church was organized at Hitesville. Capt. James Hite donated the site and helped generously with the building. Since 1831 a Sunday School had been conducted in the Hite home. He brought the literature from Kentucky.

The Old School Baptist Church was organized at Paris by Rev. Daniel Parker in 1824. For ten years the meetings were held in the court house.

The Baptist Church at Bloomfield was built when Bloomfield was a thriving town in the 40's and the stores equaled those of Paris. Bloomfield at this time was an important point on the highway laid out in 1823 from Vincennes to Chicago.

The Sunday Schools of Edgar County were begun at an early date. In 1832 Adriel Stout organized a Sunday School in the court house at Paris. Mr. Stout was a Presbyterian, but he invited all who would to attend his Sunday School. From that time as churches were organized, Sunday Schools were instituted. In the country they were generally opened in May and closed in October, bad roads hindering the attendance during the Winter months. During the Summer basket meetings were held in groves or school houses, ministers preaching in the morning and afternoon. These hardy pioneers were the people who brought civilization to Edgar County and the Illinois country.

“Then let us sing of the pioneer,
The hero hardy and strong,
Who “blazed the way” for better days,
When the road was dark and long;
They were heralds of a better time,
These men who went before,
For they wrought for coming ages,
In the brave days of yore;
Though hands were hard and calloused,
And cheeks were brown with tan,
They knew each drop on the wrinkled brow,
Was the sweat of an honest man.
And thus it is in every cause,
Which lifts aloft the rights of man,
Some one must travel on before,
Some one march in the van;
And every sacred, God born truth
Which to this world hath come,
Hath had its sturdy pioneers
Who bore the torch of faith alone.”

Information about North Arm Church received from Mrs. J. T. Musselman. Richwoods Church from Miss Ita Briscoe of Kansas. Diary of Rev. Isaac Reed from paper written by Rev. Ira Allen when pastor of church at Paris, Ill.

Other information taken from History of Edgar County edited by H. Van Sellar.